

THE EXPANSION OF OPEN UNIVERSITY OF MALAYSIA THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

Quality of the programmes and recognition of the provider open up opportunities for higher education expansion regardless of location or nationality. This expansion is pertinent to adapt to the growing demand for international education from the changing nature of the global economy and labour market. As such, it is the interest of this paper to discuss how Open University Malaysia expands its higher educational programmes via collaboration with international partners. Additionally, the paper discusses the function of the International Operation office in managing the operational activities and sustainability of the collaboration. Furthermore, a number of challenges that have surfaced in the collaboration are described and addressed for effective operations management. This paper is deemed valuable for all higher education providers who are optimistic about exploring opportunities for expansion through international collaboration.

Keywords: *cross-border, higher education, internationalisation, collaboration, programme management*

INTRODUCTION

The demand for cross-border collaborations has increased with the internationalisation of higher education (Kosmützky, 2015) through twinning, franchised programmes, online and distance education, or international branch campuses. This expansion provides access to higher education in countries where local institutions cannot meet the demand or when the new knowledge and training are not available within the nation. Past research indicates that increasing higher education enrolment would improve the quality of the population and enhance the national competitiveness in the globalising world (Mok & Wu, 2016). Collaborating with international institutions is beneficial in many ways. Partnerships can contribute to the quality development of these programmes. This is because the courses offered or developed can capitalise on expertise beyond organisational boundaries (Daley, 2008) in order to fulfil the collaborators' specific requirements. Moreover, the programmes offer new educational opportunities for learners seeking knowledge across borders. More than two million international students are self-funding their international education (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Besides, such collaborations will generate more income for both collaborating partners. Any new resources can be shared by distributing costs among partners while expanding services to global learners. Furthermore, this expansion has become increasingly important for higher education institutions

due to increased global competition and the related need to differentiate themselves from other competitors (Drori, Tienari, & Wæraas, 2015).

This paper has attempted to discuss pertinent matters regarding international collaborations in OUM by answering two main questions: first, *“How is the operation of international collaboration being managed and sustained?”* and second, *“What are the challenges experienced and how are they being addressed in the collaboration?”* In answering these questions, the function of the international operation office is described in managing the operational activities and sustainability of the collaboration. For the latter, a number of challenges that have surfaced from the collaborations are described and addressed for better understanding and more effective management of operations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Almost every country has participated in internationalisation of higher education. According to Observatory of Borderless Higher Education report (2016) published by Cross Border Education Research Team that has been tracking internationalisation development around the world, about 76 countries have hosted international programmes. Among the top five host countries are China (32), the United Arab Emirates (31), Singapore (12), Malaysia (12), and Qatar (11), which together represent a total of 98 institutions, or 39% of the world's total. The top five home countries are the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and Australia. The internationalisation market remains healthy and growing, with an estimated 180,000 students enrolled yearly worldwide. The report indicates that international collaborations are a viable and important option for higher education to be recognised in the global market.

Besides, programme mobility favours well-developed education systems and institutions. The proportion of the increased demand for mobility programmes that will benefit students in terms of academic experience and credits awarded remains unknown, but the movement of programmes and education providers across borders is expected to grow significantly. However, collaboration expansion through franchised programmes, and online and distance learning does not necessarily require the physical movement of the student or institutions. As Knight (2014) has described it, mobility has moved from people (students, faculty, scholars) to programme (twinning, franchise, virtual) to provider (branch campus) mobility, and most recently to the concerted development of education hubs. Nevertheless, the perceived legitimacy and recognition of the qualification at home and abroad is challenging to resolve. It is subject to the arrangements made in order for the qualifications to be recognised according to national, regional, or international regulations, which thereby supports mobility of the programme.

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is preferred among the developing and middle-income countries primarily due to the recognition of its programmes by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). The recognition by MQA is in the form of accreditation, which serves as a benchmark that the programmes have attained the quality standards. The MQA as a regulator, is recognised internationally to be responsible for monitoring and overseeing the quality assurance practices and accreditation of national higher education. With this recognition, international partners are very much interested to collaborate through franchised programmes with a degree awarded by OUM. Moreover, OUM leverages on technology to support its services to the partners, for example, online tutoring, online forum discussions, online student services, online registration, online payment and digital library. Furthermore, OUM also offers flexibility to its partners to set additional academic and non-academic requirements as deemed appropriate for their specific purposes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses critical reflection from the researcher's experiences of leading the International Operation Office in Open University Malaysia. Critical reflection is defined as a way of learning from and reworking experience (Fook, 2011). Critical reflection is normally used in professional settings to assist practitioners in improving practice. According to Fook (2011), if a research or work arise from a personal experience, individuals will be motivated and be open in appreciating the experiences. Thus, the critical reflection approach is used to describe the operational activities in the International Operation Office. The challenges arising from collaborations, and how these were addressed, are described to improve international operations.

International Operation Office

The International Operation office was established in OUM with the strategic mission to manage the delivery of programmes to international students via collaboration with international partners. The office functions to ensure the smooth operation of activities in three main areas: the Registry process, Operations advisor and liaison with international partners. First, the registry process includes admission, registration, examination and graduation. Second, the office acts as an operation advisor on academic matters specific to programmes, liaison with subject matter experts and programme coordinators, and on non-academic matters including policies, royalty fees and contracts. Finally, the office functions to liaise between the international partners and OUM, as well as with OUM departments such as finance, examination, tutors and faculties. The details of international partners involved in collaboration with OUM are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Collaboration with International Partners Data as at November 2017

No.	Country	Partner	Cumulative Enrolment	Cumulative Graduates
1.	Ghana	Accra Institute Of Technology (AIT)	1400	319
2.	Bahrain	Arab Open University (AOU)	1142	1035
3.	Hungary	Eszterhazy Karoly University (EKU)	53	19
4.	Somalia	Mogadishu University (MU)	79	53
5.	Zambia	NIEC School of Business Management Trust (NIEC)	38	0
6.	Maldives	Villa College(VC)	3733	1698
7.	Sri Lanka	Graduate School of Management (GSM)	140	26
8.	Vietnam	Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH)	2800	1169
9.	Sri Lanka	IDM Group Of Companies (IDM)	33	2
10.	Sri Lanka	International Institute of Health Sciences (IIHS)	849	176
11.	Somalia	Simad University (SIMAD)	406	162
12.	Yemen	University of Science and Technology (USTY)	759	438
13.	Bangladesh	West Coast Institute Of Management & Technology (WCIMT)	43	0
14.	Mauritius	Mauritius Institute of Education	10	0
TOTAL			11,485	4,829

A popular postgraduate programme among international partners is Master of Business Administration (MBA) and for the undergraduate programmes, Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA). A significant number of students and graduates are from Villa College, Maldives. The first international collaboration was with Arab Open University in 2007 and the latest collaboration in place is with International College of Law, Business Administration and Technology from United Arab Emirates in August 2017. All the collaborations are initiated with the signing of a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) for a five-year period. Upon expiry, the agreement will be renewed for a three-year-period, subject to the partner's performance.

Apart of managing the delivery of programmes with international partners, the office is also responsible for monitoring the sustainability of the collaboration. To this end, a strategy, seeking either to maintain or exit the partnership is implemented. Table 2 shows how the strategy is determined, based on certain criteria of performance for each programme.

Table 2: Maintain or Exit Strategy

Compliance Criteria	A (More Empowerment)	B (Help with Marketing)	C (To Exit: Maintain Existing Students)	D (To Exit: Proposed Exit Strategy)
Good Compliance	√	√	x	x
Good Intake	√	x	√	x
Good Return	√	x	√	x

The strategy consists of four approaches: A, B, C, D. In detail, strategy A is for partners who fulfil the criteria of good compliance (i.e. comply with OUM's academic system, operation rules, and regulations), good number of student intake (more than the minimum of eight students per programme intake) and good return to the company (prompt payment of royalty fees). For partners that fulfil these criteria, they will be given the advantages of empowerment, such as 1) opportunity to increase the number of OUM programmes to be offered in their countries, 2) opportunity to renew the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) upon expiry and 3) flexibility to set additional academic and non-academic requirements deemed to be appropriate for their specific purposes.

Apart from strategy A, strategy B is also applied to partners with whom OUM intends to maintain collaborations, even though student intake and return may be low. OUM will assist partners in this category with marketing efforts through social media and the use of marketing agents. To maintain the quality of the programmes offered and standard of the operations process, OUM has strict set of rules and regulations for partners to comply, such as annual meetings with a joint academic committee that consists of the vice president and academic representatives; abiding by the regulated operating procedures such as: assignments and exam questions are moderated by OUM faculty members, teaching staff appointed are endorsed by OUM, student admission criteria are based on OUM policies and many others; and finally, abiding by several types of quality assurance audits, conducted periodically by OUM.

It is pertinent for partners to adhere to these compliance processes, as failure to do so will result in strategy C or D being implemented, even though the partner achieves a good intake and good return. A written notice to terminate the collaboration or penalty will be imposed to the relevant partner. In the event of early termination of the collaboration, the partner shall make necessary arrangements to ensure that the students who are enrolled would be able to

complete the programme without undue difficulties. Thus far, the majority of partners have shown a high level of compliance with the stipulated quality processes. Nevertheless, there are a few partners that have been given a written notice and the collaborations with some partners have been terminated.

COLLABORATION CHALLENGES

Managing international partners with different working styles, expectations, culture, and communication practices, among other differences, is indeed a very challenging task. One of the biggest challenges is the partner's commitment for timeliness. The operational activities for every semester involve new and senior student registration, submission of assessment documentation and royalty payment. These responsibilities are clearly stated in the yearly operation calendar as well as stipulated in the MoA. Yet, partners often have to be reminded of these activities frequently, which has created inconvenience, increased workload, and a higher consumption of time, in addition to causing data input errors. Besides the reminder for timeliness to avoid service disruption, the office has recently taken the initiative of recording all the pertinent submission dates and any pending items from the partners. Operations reports for each partner will be shared with the higher management of both parties each semester.

Another main challenge is the standardisation of the academic calendar system. As OUM's international partners are located in different time zones, there will definitely be differences in days off from work or different days which are considered as weekends. This creates a problem in standardising the timing or scheduling for tutorial classes and examinations across partners. As a result, the international office needs to manage the registration, examination and royalty payments for every month, in contrast with the management of local students which only need to be managed by semester. Due to these differences, a separate campus management system is developed to cater to the partners' needs, particularly in relation to scheduling matters. Partners are required to submit their yearly operational calendar to the international office in advance, and this is then shared with relevant OUM departments.

OUM also face difficulties when collaborations with particular partners are terminated. Even though, the MoA states that that partner have to serve existing students in the event of terminations, in certain cases it is OUM that has continued to serve these students. This occurs in two types of situations: first, when a particular student requests to pursue their studies directly with OUM and second, when the partner is no longer able to serve the student. In these cases, students were only allowed to continue their programmes with OUM if a fully online programme was available, whereby the necessary courses were being offered through a learning management system platform. All the students enrolled in these fully online programmes will be provided with course guides, digital modules, e-learning materials, videos and dedicated online tutor to assist their learning and interaction in the forum. Finally, in order to maintain the quality of the work process, a Google drive platform with dedicated link folder was used to share any expectations, regulations and standard documentation needed for the partners. In addition to the experiences described in the OUM setting, past studies have also indicated a long list of challenges encountered in international collaborations, such as low quality programmes and providers, foreign qualifications not recognised by domestic employers or education institutions, high cost of study, little importance being given to collaborative research, national higher education policy objectives not being met, lack of teachers' intercultural understanding and many more (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2014; Kosmützky, 2015). These challenges may affect the pace of internationalisation especially in promoting particular countries as an education hub. However, it is important to acknowledge that international collaboration will

remain a central force in higher education if institutions and regulators share a mutual concern for high quality assurance, integrity, standards and professionalism.

CONCLUSION

OUM has become a reputable university in the global arena, with various academic programmes conducted in collaboration with international partners. Although the contexts of the university and the foreign counterparts differ in many areas, OUM strictly enforces high quality assurance of the academic programmes and high standard of operating procedures among partners. Maintain or exit strategy, the usage of technology to facilitate communication or dissemination of knowledge and continuous initiatives for best practices are the mechanism towards these directions. These efforts are critical for OUM, as an education service provider which plans to be in the market for a long term. In promoting its brand internationally, OUM cannot afford to offer low quality services. The way forward for OUM will be towards making an effort to expand their fully online academic programmes directly with international students without any collaboration with international partners. However, this option still requires the assistance of education agents to assist learners in pursuing their studies, dealing with immigration regulations, logistic and other relevant matters.

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